

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
DIVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES
CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

ROY COOPER
GOVERNOR

MANDY COHEN, MD, MPH
SECRETARY

WAYNE E. BLACK
DIRECTOR

**Cherokee County Department of Social Services
Child Welfare Program Evaluation Report
October 2017**

Background and Purpose

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services has the responsibility under General Statute 108A-74, to evaluate and provide technical assistance to county departments of social services to assure child welfare programs are in compliance with state laws, rules, and policies. The evaluation entails a review of program protocols and practices, which can include a review of case records and data sources, to determine the program's level of functioning and risk.

Focus of the Program Evaluation

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services (NCDSS), in partnership with Cherokee County Department of Social Services (CCDSS), conducted a program evaluation of the child welfare program in Cherokee County. In preparation for the evaluation, potential program risks were identified by CCDSS and NCDSS regarding time to permanence for children in Foster Care. The evaluation included an examination of multiple case records for service delivery to focus on the Foster Care program area. The reviewed cases were selected to provide insight into these potential program risks. Since the sample selected was targeted, the review data is not necessarily reflective of the overall child welfare program.

This report provides an assessment of areas to which Cherokee County must apply resources to address and guidance on how these areas can be addressed. The Cherokee County Program Development Plan will be revised to incorporate these findings to enhance services to children and families.

Program Evaluation

On October 11, 2017 through October 13, 2017, the program monitoring team, consisting of 3 NCDSS staff as well as 8 county staff provided an on-site review of cases, primarily focusing on the Foster Care program. The cases selected included Foster Care cases that were open at the time the sample was pulled in September 2017. The cases reviewed included a sample of:

- 25 Foster Care cases

The review team focused on the required procedures and best practices in child welfare using standardized review tools.

Key Observations/ Findings and Recommendations

This report outlines four key findings/observations and recommendations identified during the program monitoring evaluation within the Child Welfare programs.

- I. Engaging Families
- II. Documentation
- III. Contacts
- IV. Staff Development/Training

I. Findings/Observations: Engaging Families

NCDSS policy states a Child and Family Team Meeting (CFT) shall be used to assist the family in developing a plan to address safety concerns and develop the Family Services Agreement, or update it if circumstances warrant changes. A CFT consists of family members and their community supports that come together to create, implement, and update a plan with the youth and family. CFT's are required to be held at the following intervals after a child comes into care: 1) within 30 days; 2) within 60 days; 3) within 90 days after the 60-day meeting, not more than 150 days after coming into care; 4) every 6 months thereafter throughout the life of the case; 5) when there is a change in the plan of family circumstance and it is necessary to reconvene the team to discuss progress; and 6) continue to be required after reunification is no longer the goal. NCDSS policy states that the documentation of the CFTs shall be completed on the CFT Documentation Instrument. NCDSS policy states that every child in the custody or placement responsibility of a county department of social services shall be reviewed by a Permanency Planning Action Team (PPAT). Permanency Planning Action Team reviews are required at the following intervals: within 60 days of the child coming into agency custody or placement responsibility; within 90 days of the first agency team review, but no more than 150 days of the child coming into agency custody or placement responsibility; and every six months thereafter. These teams are responsible for ensuring that every foster care case moves quickly toward a permanent resolution.

The chart below reflects the percentage of time CCDSS achieved the following activities related to CFTs and PPATs in the Foster Care cases reviewed:

CFT/PPAT Activity	Percent Achieved
Documentation of preparing the family for the CFT	32%
Using the CFT Documentation Instrument to document CFTs	13%
Initial CFT held within 30 days of custody	46%
Ongoing CFTs held per policy	40%
Facilitator used for CFTs per policy	29%
Child involved in Initial CFT	16%
Child involved in ongoing CFTs	30%
Initial PPAT within 60 days of custody	57%
Ongoing PPATs held per policy	50%

The purpose of the Out of Home Family Services Agreement (OHFSA) is to specify a plan to respond to the conditions or needs that threaten a child's safety and place him or her at risk of future harm while identifying and building on the family's strengths. The OHFSA should address the needs of the family identified in the Family Assessment of Strengths and Needs, safety issues, and the future risk of harm to the child. It also outlines a plan to meet those needs contingent upon the actions and activities of the family and the social worker. OHFSAs developed with the family should be the result of formal and informal assessments with the family and specify conditions/behaviors affecting the child's present safety or that put the child at risk of future harm. When developing objectives, the OHFSA should describe specifically what the desired behavior/condition or expected changes will look like when the need is met so the caregiver and the social worker are clear about what is expected and when it has been accomplished. This serves as the framework upon which the agency's work

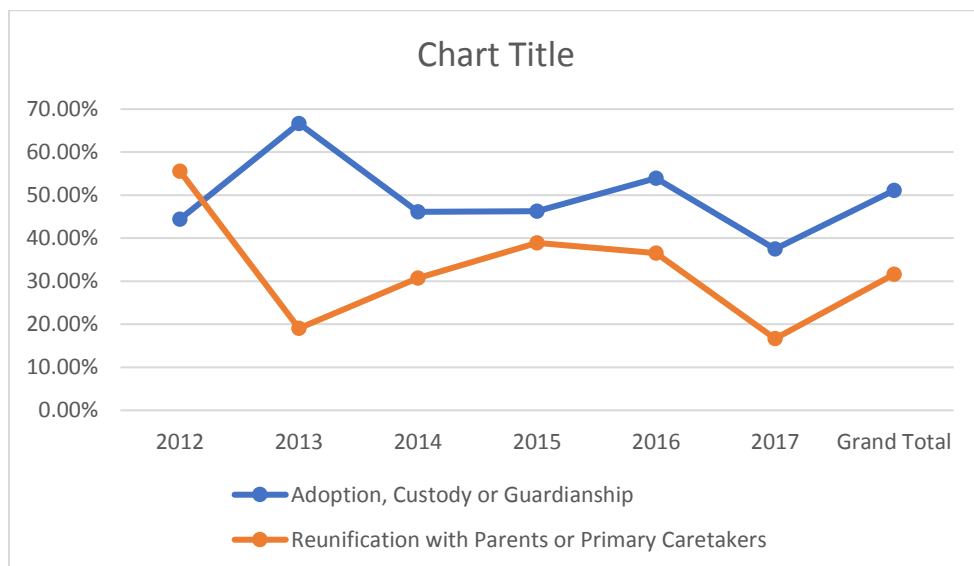
with the family and child is based, and drives the agency's work with the family. NCDSS policy states that the OHFSA shall be developed within 30 days of the date of agency custody and updated at least every 6 months thereafter in Foster Care cases. The FSA should be developed at the Child and Family Team Meeting with the family and its support system. Documentation and completion of the decision-making tools should reflect the casework and services to address the child and family needs on a continual basis and are designed to help shape the scope of work with the child's parents.

The chart below reflects the percentage of time CCDSS achieved the following activities related to Out-of-Home Family Services Agreements (OHFSA) in the Foster Care cases reviewed:

OHFSA Activity	Percentage Achieved
The mother participated in development of the OHFSA	53%
The father participated in development of the OHFSA	39%
The OHFSA addressed the needs identified in the 5010 and Strengths and Needs with mother	78%
The OHFSA addressed the needs identified in the 5010 and Strengths and Needs with father	50%
The OHFSA focused on child safety for the mother in the home	78%
The OHFSA focused on child safety for the father in the home	71%
For all OHFSAs, they included steps the agency would take to facilitate the agreement goal	58%
The mother's OHFSA was formally updated at least every 6 months	32%
The father's OHFSA was formally updated at least every 6 months	31%

Additional information gathered during the program evaluation included:

- CCDSS staff did not understand the differences in CFT and PPAT meetings, including their individual purposes in meeting requirements of law and policy.
- There was documentation that some OHFSAs were completed in the office and taken to the parent for review and sign off.
- CFSR Round 3 data April 1, 2016 through March 31, 2017 shows permanency for children in Foster Care within 12 months was 52.9% for CCDSS, 12% over the national standard, and 17-22% over the state, small counties, and Judicial district outcomes. CCDSS staff indicated they are moving to permanency quickly in many cases where parents are not engaged. The following chart shows the percent of children moving to permanency through custody, guardianship or adoption versus reunification for each calendar year.



Recommendations: Engaging Families

- CCDSS develop a means to ensure all staff are informed on law and policy related to CFT and PPAT meetings, including the purpose for the meetings and requirements for documentation.
- CCDSS develop and implement a strategy to ensure staff make diligent efforts to engage families in development of the OHFSA.
- CCDSS develop and implement a strategy to ensure OHFSAs address all identified needs, and objectives and activities are focused on child safety.

II. Findings/Observations: Documentation

NCDSS policy states the social workers shall document and record all actions taken during any child welfare case. Documentation shall include a description of the on-going assessment of risk, safety, and health of a child. Included in documentation shall be a description of the case work and services to address the child and family's needs on a continual basis that are designed to shape the scope of the work with the child's parents. NCDSS policy states that documentation should reflect the efforts to meet all policy requirements and if they are not met, there shall be documentation to reflect the diligent efforts made. NCDSS policy states that case documentation must be current within 7 days.

The following information was gathered during the program evaluation:

- For all Foster Care cases reviewed, 55% of all legal requirements were met. This data was impacted by missing documentation or discrepancies in orders. Reviewer comments indicated there were missing court reports, missing court orders, and orders indicating there had been multiple adjudications. In some cases, the court orders available conflicted with information in later reports or narrative describing case actions, and in some cases the dates of the court reports were never changed, although the reports were supposed to be covering several different hearings. The management team indicated there were ongoing issues with timeliness and accuracy of court orders, and other difficulties in court processes had led to appeals and dismissals of cases.
- Initial placement activities, required within the first 30 days of custody, were documented in 42% of Foster Care cases reviewed.
- In 38% of Foster Care cases reviewed, required tools and services were documented. These tools included visitation, health, education, and decision-making tools and activities.
- In 63% of applicable Foster Care cases reviewed, criminal record checks were found on all persons 16 and older residing in the home of kinship placements. In 38% of applicable Foster Care cases reviewed RIL checks were found on all adults residing in the kinship home. CCDSS indicates these checks were completed during CPS Assessments or CPS In-Home Services and not pulled over into the Foster Care file.
- Reviewers saw monthly foster care contact records that were duplicated across months, and therefore were unable to confirm multiple contacts had been completed. The only item that changed on the document was the date, and all other narrative remained the same.
- In 68% of Foster Care cases reviewed, the case narrative was clear enough to indicate who said what during interviews/interactions and what observations and actions were made and taken.
- In 27% of Foster Care cases reviewed, required ongoing activities such as notifications of placement moves and shared parenting were documented.
- CCDSS reviewers indicated there was a lot of work being done that was not getting documented, and the documentation that was present lacked specific information on contacts or tasks completed.
- CCDSS provided a current Foster Care case list to the program monitor that showed 24 cases open from 2012 through 2017 that social workers are holding onto because they have not completed all the documentation, although the agency had completed and entered DSS-5027 and DSS-5094 forms to close the files in the state system.

Recommendations: Documentation

- CCDSS identify specific staff development needs to address the understanding of court processes, and accuracy of court documents, that are impacting outcomes for children in care.
- CCDSS identify a means to regularly review documentation for providing staff with feedback, and ensuring documentation is accurate and current.
- CCDSS develop and implement a strategy to address backlogged paperwork to close out old case files.
- CCDSS develop an agency strategy to ensure all required assessments are completed on kinship placements.
- CCDSS develop and implement a strategy to ensure workers have thoroughly updated and completed all required forms including relative notifications, health and education forms, and decision-making tools per law and policy.
- CCDSS develop a means to assure all social work staff are aware and compliant with the agency strategies.

III. Findings/Observations: Contacts

NCDSS policy states that a social worker shall have face to face contact with a child in the agency's custody at least monthly, and the majority of these visits shall occur in the child's residence. The social worker shall have more frequent contact when indicated by the child's needs. Until Termination of Parental Rights, there shall be at least one face-to-face contact with the parent(s) per month. The social worker shall make contact at least twice a month with a person or persons significant to a child's case other than the placement providers, such as family members, collaterals, or other service providers.

The Foster Care cases reviewed showed the following percentage of contacts achieved per policy:

	Percent Achieved	Percent that documented Diligent Efforts for those not achieved
Victim Children	72%	43%
Mothers	14%	44%
Fathers	11%	50%
Collaterals	54%	NA

Recommendations: Contacts

- CCDSS develop and implement an agency strategy for ensuring all contacts are made, or diligent efforts are made and documented, per policy in the provision of Foster Care.
- CCDSS develop a means to assure social work staff are aware and compliant with the agency strategies.

IV. Finding/Observations: Staff Development

NCDSS policy states, supervisors are responsible for teaching and modeling practice standards that are consistent with Federal and State statutes, Administrative Rules, and Child Welfare Services policy. Supervisors are responsible for providing oversight to social work practice performed by their workers. Supervisors are also responsible to ensure staff receive all training required by law (N.C.G.S. § 131D-10.6A (b)) and Division policy.

The following information was gathered during the program evaluation:

- The Foster Care Supervisor is new to supervision and half of the Foster Care staff are new social workers.
- While discussing missing or conflicting court documents, appeals, and dismissals, the CCDSS management team indicated the staff need training, or additional support, for writing effective court reports, and testifying in court.
- Division reviewers looked at entire Foster Care cases, while county reviewers looked at Foster Care casework in the last year. No differences in outcomes were identified. CCDSS indicated the new supervisor and half of the current Foster Care team had worked in the same unit with the same

expectations for at least seven years together, and the team was continuing to operate under these expectations.

Recommendations: Staff Development

- CCDSS contact the state Attorney General's office to request the ability for them to provide TA or training about court reports, court orders, testimony, or TPR.
- CCDSS develop and implement a strategy for staff to receive training to address deficits found in other identified findings/observations.

Program Development Plan (PDP)

Prior program evaluations of Cherokee County DSS resulted in the development a Program Development Plan (PDP) which was subsequently approved by NCDSS. Previously identified areas of the PDP included Supervision, CPS Assessments, Training, Case Management, Contacts, and Documentation as areas for program development. During this program evaluation, a review of the current PDP was held. The attached PDP includes updates on the progress, challenges, relevant state data, and recommendations about the specific goals and activities outlined in the plan.

Additional Information

The leadership of CCDSS was actively engaged in the evaluation process. The agency embraced this program evaluation and saw it as a learning process. The agency has requested more oversight and technical assistance from NCDSS to improve their outcomes for children and families.

Several strengths were noted during the program evaluation.

- Reviewer comments indicated that education and medical records were in case files.
- The management team talked about the positive relationships social workers have made in the community.
- CCDSS staff indicated there are positive relationships between social workers and they work well as a team.
- There were several examples in cases where social workers made diligent efforts to locate or engage parents including multiple types of efforts to engage an incarcerated father, and reaching out in multiple ways to get parents involved in another case.
- The CCDSS management team and child welfare social workers acknowledged and openly discussed needs, and had already initiated some ideas for addressing them. For example, surface pros have recently been given to staff to assist in improving documentation.
- CFSR Round 3 data April 1, 2016 through March 31, 2017 shows:
 - CCDSS placement stability is 4.1 which is at the national standard and shows less placement moves per child than the state, small counties, and the Judicial district during the same timeframe.
 - CCDSS permanency for children in Foster Care 24 months or more was 58.8%, 28% higher than the national standard and higher than the state, small counties, and the Judicial district during the same timeframe.

Subsequent Steps

The Program Monitor will return to the agency to have a facilitated meeting with appropriate county staff within 45 days from the program evaluation. The purpose of the meeting is to enhance our technical assistance to counties in developing and revising quality PDPs that are measurable, attainable, and sustainable. During the facilitated meeting and in partnership with the agency, we will develop and revise the goals, strategies, and activities of your PDP. As a result of the facilitated meeting, the agency will have an updated version of their PDP. If further development is needed by agency staff, the agency will have an additional 15 days from the

facilitated meeting to submit their PDP. The PDP will be reviewed by NCDSS and a final version agreed upon, which will direct the work of the Children's Program Representative and other NCDSS staff with the county.

The NCDSS point of contact for Cherokee County DSS is Program Monitor, Lyn Clarkson Osteen. Ms. Osteen, in conjunction with your Children's Program Representative (CPR), Brian Vogl will provide or arrange any technical assistance needed by your agency to implement the plan. Please submit the plan to Brian Vogl, at brian.vogl@dhhs.nc.gov.

Once the plan is implemented, NCDSS will provide oversight and technical assistance as outlined in the program development plan. The plan will be reviewed every 6 months with the Program Monitor, to include a review of data in addition to the program development plan.

The NCDSS appreciates Cherokee County DSS's commitment to improving outcomes for children and families and looks forward to our work together in continuous quality improvement.